

International Cultural Immersion: Assessing the Influence of a Group Intervention on Intercultural Sensitivity for Counselor Trainees

By: Segal M. Barden, Laura Shannonhouse, & [Keith Mobley](#)

Barden, S. M., Shannonhouse, L. R., & Mobley, A. K. (2015). International cultural immersion: Assessing the influence of a group intervention on intercultural sensitivity for counselor trainees. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 40, 117-141.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in JOURNAL FOR SPECIALISTS IN GROUP WORK on 3 February 2015, available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/01933922.2014.992505>

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Abstract:

Scholars (e.g., Bemak & Chung, 2004) underscore the need for group workers to be culturally sensitive. One group training strategy, cultural immersion, is often employed to develop cultural sensitivity. However, no studies have utilized quasi-experimental methodologies to assess differences in cultural sensitivity between trainees that immerse compared to those that do not immerse. To this end, this article provides an overview of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, description of an international cultural immersion experience and quasi-experimental research design, analysis of data, discussion of results, implications for group facilitators and counselor educators, and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Group process | International cultural immersion | Intercultural sensitivity | Quasi-experimental

Article:

Awareness of cultural differences and the ability to respond to client needs appropriately is critical for the effective practice of counselors (Burnett, Hamel, & Long, 2004; Sue & Sue, 2012). Although scholars have argued for increased cultural competence for more than 30 years (Burnett et al., 2004; Lee, 2013; Pedersen, 1991; Reynolds, 2001; Sue et al., 1982; Worthington, Soth-McNett, & Moreno, 2007), counselor trainees remain unprepared to respond to the needs of minority populations (Ancis & Sanchez-Hucles, 2000; Sue & Sue, 2012), including immigrants of foreign countries (Chung & Grabosky, 2011). Based on self-reports, trainees feel underprepared to work with minorities (Kim & Lyons, 2003; Lee, 2013) and external measures indicate that beginning counselors continue to possess racial and gender biases upon conclusion of their training programs (Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999; Ponterotto, Fuertes, & Chen, 2000; Sue & Sue, 2012). In addition to being culturally competent when conducting individual

counseling, recent attention has highlighted the paucity in literature and need for counselor trainees to be culturally competent when facilitating groups.

While racial, ethnic, and multicultural dynamics are discussed in the group literature within the context of cultural competence (Bieschke, Gehlert, Wilson, Matthews, & Wade, 2003), it is generally agreed that the literature addressing multicultural and diversity issues in group work is in the preliminary stages (Bemak & Chung, 2004; Corey, 2004). In 1998, the Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW) established the Principles for Diversity-Competent Group Workers (PDCGW) to standardize and guide group workers in developing cultural competence (Haley, Brown, & Molina, 1998). In 2012, the PDCGW were revised and updated, currently titled “The Multicultural and Social Justice Competence Principles for Group Workers” (Singh, Merchant, Skudrzyk, & Ingene, 2012). The revised competency principles encourage counselors to be aware of their own biases and cultural identities, highlighting the need to understand how they may influence group processes and dynamics. In support of multicultural group competencies, Bemak and Chung (2004) assert that counselor trainees must develop self-awareness and cultural knowledge as a necessary foundation to effectively facilitate groups. Although dialogue on the necessity for multicultural group workers is prevalent, little has been done to integrate this need in current training practices (Smith & Shin, 2008). Therefore, gaps in effective pedagogical practices remain.

As such, recent reviews (e.g., Priester et al., 2008) have identified an absence of skills-oriented, experiential, multicultural training interventions in counselor preparation programs. Cultural immersion (CI), “direct, prolonged, in vivo contact with a culture different from that of the counselor trainee” (Pope-Davis & Coleman, 1997, p. 232), has been found effective at increasing cultural competence (Pedersen & Leong, 1997; West-Olatunji, Goodman, Mehta, & Templeton, 2011). Trainees process and debrief their field experiences in group, which is argued to be a critical component of CI (Lassiter, Napolitano, Culbreth, & Ng, 2008; Ribeiro, 2004; Shannonhouse, 2013) and the vehicle whereby trainees increase cultural competence (Abreu, Gim Chung, & Atkinson, 2000; Alexander, Kruczek, & Ponterotto, 2005). Debriefing in a group format is vital to process the strong emotions triggered by CI (Chung & Bemak, 2002). Without effective group process, trainees may retreat to previously held ethnocentric views to make sense of new ideas and feelings (Chung & Bemak, 2002; Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2009; Ishii, Gilbride, & Stensrud, 2009) which can negatively impact trainees and their interactions with community members (Hui, 2009).

While group process differs for every CI experience, there is agreement that reflection must be intentionally structured to explore personal biases and assumptions (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Hernández, Almeida, & Dolan-Del Vecchio, 2005; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). By engaging in self-reflection and inner dialogue, individuals begin to think about their existence and identity “in-relation,” affording them a greater awareness of another’s context (Clark, 1993). Sensitivity in working with culturally diverse persons is argued to increase as understanding of cultural differences becomes more complex. Intercultural sensitivity is considered to be the attitudinal forerunner to cultural competence, defined by Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman (2003) as “attaining the ability to construe and experience cultural differences in more complex ways” (p. 421). Bennett (1986) posited a model of intercultural sensitivity, the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), that is based on concepts from cognitive psychology and

constructivism, and operates on the assumption that individuals follow a predictable path as they gain experience with different cultures (Hammer et al., 2003).

Given the need to assess for effective pedagogical practices in increasing cultural sensitivity, conceptualizing counselor trainees' intercultural sensitivity in terms of developmental levels, and targeting pedagogical interventions based on developmental levels seems critical. Furthermore, limited scholarship has been grounded in strong theoretical models, focused on the efficacy of group interventions on increasing intercultural sensitivity, or has used quantitative research methodology. The purpose of this article is threefold. First, we provide an overview of the theoretical model, the DMIS that was used to conceptualize the cultural immersion experience. Next, results from a quasi-experimental pre/post comparison of students that participated in a group level international cultural immersion intervention compared to students that did not participate, as measured by the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI; Hammer et al., 2003), an instrument grounded in the DMIS framework. Lastly, a discussion of results and implications for group facilitators and counselor educators will be provided. For the purpose of this article, intercultural sensitivity and cultural sensitivity will be used interchangeably. We begin with an overview of the DMIS.

Developmental model of intercultural sensitivity

The DMIS focuses on change at the individual level through a developmental framework in which individuals advance through a series of stages in an effort to gain intercultural sensitivity. The six progressive stages are broken down into two groups; three ethnocentric stages (denial, polarization, and minimization), and three ethnorelative stages (acceptance, adaptation, and integration). The aim is to identify ethnocentric viewpoints and develop more ethnorelative perspectives (Hammer et al., 2003).

Individuals exhibiting characteristics in the ethnocentric stages of denial, polarization, and minimization avoid other cultures and experience their own culture as central to reality (Bennett, 1986). The denial stage is characterized by a rejection that cultural differences are present between groups and constitutes the ultimate ethnocentric position, where one's worldview is unchallenged and central to all reality. The next stage, polarization, includes both defense and reversal states. Defense is a state that involves recognizing differences and perceiving them as threatening, therefore engaging in defense strategies, whereas reversal is an overly critical orientation towards one's own culture. Because differences must be recognized in order to perceive them as either threatening or superior, this stage is seen as a progression from denying that there are differences. In the last ethnocentric stage, minimization, cultural differences are minimized under the weight of either cultural similarities or universalism. Minimization is viewed as development beyond denial and defense as cultural differences are overtly acknowledged and not negatively evaluated, yet persons in this stage fail to accept and understand the cultural context of others (Bennett, 1986; Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josic, & Jon, 2009).

Individuals exhibiting characteristics in the ethnorelative orientations of acceptance, adaptation, and integration value other cultures and experience their culture in the context of other cultures (Bennett, 1986). Acceptance is the state in which cultural differences are acknowledged and respected; one can see cultural values as relative and understands individuals through

differences. The adaptation stage expands one's worldview, incorporating components of other worldviews, and involves a change in the organization of lived experience; one begins to form a bicultural identification. Lastly, integration involves a lack of strong cultural identification, in which one has the ability to be fluid, moving in and out of different cultural frameworks; thus the individual in this stage identifies as multicultural (Bennett, 1986; Paige et al., 2009). In sum, the more ethnocentric orientations in the DMIS can be seen as ways to avoid cultural differences by either denying the existence of difference, raising defenses, or minimizing the importance of them; while the more ethnorelative orientations are ways of seeking cultural differences by accepting the importance of difference, adapting perspectives, or integrating the concept of difference into one's identity (Bennett, 1986; Hammer et al., 2003).

Although the need for cultural sensitivity when working with individuals and groups has been the focus of scholarship and discourse, limited research exists focused on the efficacy of interventions targeting increased intercultural sensitivity. Counselor training programs need to assess the effectiveness of current training models in multiculturalism, highlighting how to teach counselor trainees to adapt and respond to the cultural differences when working with individuals and groups. Furthermore, the lack of empirical research focusing on changes in cultural sensitivity between experimental and comparison groups that participate in CI experiences highlights the need for scholars to investigate the influence of international cultural immersion using rigorous methodology such as experimental research designs.

Cultural immersion

Several researchers (e.g., Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Kim & Lyons, 2003; Rundstrom, 2005) examining the development of cultural sensitivity indicate that contact and exposure with people from diverse backgrounds develops higher degrees of cultural empathy, increased awareness, self-efficacy, and competence when compared to primarily didactic instruction. CI requires facilitators to create a safe environment in which counselors can challenge their existing worldviews and assumptions (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Barden & Cashwell, 2013; Paige et al., 2009). Group facilitators often engage trainees in educational group discussions regarding the larger socio-political-historical context of the communities in which trainees are immersed, and cultural values, beliefs, practices, and so on that individuals have encountered in the field (Alexander et al., 2005; Ishii et al., 2009), affording trainees a greater breadth and depth of understanding about the cultural context in which one is immersed. In addition to understanding content, CI positions trainees to experience being a culturally diverse "other," illustrating the struggles for minority clients and underscoring the influences of culture on behavior and the need for helping professionals to be culturally sensitive (Chung & Bemak, 2002). Processing a trainee's experience of being "other" is an example of a counseling group, often resulting in increased awareness. CI is intended to enhance the understanding of course content while moving beyond the narrow scope of knowledge acquisition (Pope-Davis & Coleman, 1997). In this way, immersion experiences provide a critical experience for counselor trainees that cannot be achieved solely by didactic instruction (Burnett et al., 2004).

Need for the study

Limitations in empirical research supporting CI include instrumentation, sampling issues, and lack of rigorous methodology. The majority of multicultural counseling research has focused on self-report measures of cultural competence and sensitivity when assessing for the efficacy of various interventions. Additional limitations in the empirical foundation supporting cultural immersion include the limited reliability and validity of widely used multicultural assessments. For example, Constantine, Gloria, & Ladany (2002) asserted that three common multicultural measures do not support the factor structure that they purport to be grounded in. Additionally, Ladany, Constantine, Miller, Erikson, & Muse-Burke (2000) stated that current multicultural instruments may be actually measuring a form of multicultural self-efficacy, as measures tend to measure respondents' beliefs about providing MCC services, rather than their actual abilities. A thorough critique of multicultural assessments is beyond the scope of this article; see Ponterotto, Rieger, Barrett, and Sparks (1994) for a detailed review of multicultural instrumentation and inherent limitations. Therefore, there is a need for CI research that utilizes psychometrically strong instruments grounded in clear theoretical underpinnings.

Few empirical investigations on CI have attempted to quantify changes with pre-post measurements (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006). In our review of the literature, we found five empirical studies assessing for pre-post changes in intercultural sensitivity as a result of CI, although no studies sampled counselor trainees. Medina-López-Portillo (2004) measured the intercultural sensitivity of 28 American students who participated in (a) 7-week CI in Taxco, Mexico ($n = 18$), and (b) a 16-week CI in Mexico City ($n = 10$). Results indicated that intercultural sensitivity increased as a result of the CI, with students who spent more time in the field (i.e., 16 weeks) reporting higher gains in intercultural sensitivity. Similarly, Engle and Engle (2004) assessed the intercultural sensitivity of American students who took part in a CI in France for either one semester or a full year. Results indicated that duration of immersion was significant in predicting intercultural changes from pre- and post-immersion assessments. While spending more time immersed seems helpful to acquiring intercultural sensitivity, it is not clear how that time was spent, what mechanisms were utilized (i.e., selecting CI activities according to level of intercultural sensitivity), or if process groups were structured in a manner in which trainees were challenged to reflect about the host culture, or reflect upon their values, beliefs, and worldview, and the impact on their skills as a professional counselor. In another study, Pederson (2010) assessed three groups using pre- and post-IDI results: (a) a group of students ($n = 16$) that integrated diversity training pedagogy (e.g., guided reflection, group process, etc.), (b) a group of students ($n = 16$) in the same CI experience who did not have that diversity training, and (c) a control group ($n = 13$) of students who stayed home. Pederson (2010) drew upon Vande Berg and colleagues (2004) and Lederman (2007) to argue that sending students to a location abroad for academic study is not sufficient toward increasing intercultural sensitivity, asserting that intentional guided reflection was needed to increase intercultural sensitivity. Similarly, Goodman and West-Olatunji (2009) claimed processing in group format is required during CI; they “engaged [students] in 3–4 hr of group process and reflection time daily” which “enabled them to engage in introspection and understanding” (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2009, p. 461). In addition, Paige, Cohen, and Shively, (2004) reported overall increases in intercultural sensitivity as measured by the IDI, with significant declines in the reversal scores within the ethnocentric scales.

Only one of the aforementioned studies utilized a comparison group measure and none of them clarified the mechanisms whereby students acquired increased cultural sensitivity. A needed first step is a quasi-experimental research study with a comparison group to evaluate the impact on cultural sensitivity of an intentional CI (i.e., one that structured activities according to developmental level of intercultural sensitivity, and utilized both psycho-education and counseling process groups to debrief experiences in the field). Specifically, we postulated the following research questions: What differences exist in developmental levels of intercultural sensitivity for students who participated in an international immersion experience compared to students that did not participate? Do initial levels of intercultural sensitivity impact change in level of intercultural sensitivity as a result of participating in an international immersion?

Methodology

Participants

Participants for the current study included four groups of counselor trainees ($N = 37$) in a CACREP-accredited full-time counselor preparation program at a mid-sized University in the Southeast. Two groups (experimental) participated in a 3-week, 6 credit hr international cultural immersion course in Costa Rica either in the summer of 2011 or the summer of 2012, and two groups (comparison) did not participate in the immersion and were voluntary participants enrolled in courses either during the summer of 2011 or the summer of 2012. Comparison group participants engaged in coursework as usual according to their plans of study, without receiving any type of additional training or multicultural supplementation. Given the quasi-experimental design of this investigation with uncontrolled confounding variables (e.g., the specific courses enrolled in by comparison group participants), it is best to consider the non-experimental group as a comparison rather than control group (Creswell, 2008). A total of 19 participants contributed data from the experimental group (Male, $n = 3$; Female $n = 16$). Eighty-four percent ($n = 16$) of the participants identified as Caucasian, 10.5% ($n = 2$) as Asian-American, and 5.2% ($n = 1$) as Latino/Latina. Participants were doctoral ($n = 3$) and masters students ($n = 16$), with ages ranging from 23 to 32 years old ($M = 26.0$). Similarly, a total of 18 participants contributed data to the comparison groups (Male, $n = 4$; Female, $n = 14$). Seventy two percent ($n = 16$) of those participants identified as Caucasian and 9.1% ($n = 2$) identified as Black/African American. All comparison group participants were masters students ($n = 18$), with ages ranging from 23 to 45 years old ($M = 26.6$).

Experimental Group Intervention: International Cultural Immersion

The international immersion experience was primarily facilitated by a counselor education faculty member and co-facilitated by two doctoral teaching assistants with previous CI experience. Intervention activities for the international cultural immersion were selected based on the group's developmental level of cultural sensitivity as conceptualized by the DMIS. Given that the majority of participants were in ethnocentric stages of intercultural sensitivity development (see Results section for baseline data), primarily characterized as viewing their own culture as central to their reality, intervention activities were targeted to increase knowledge and awareness related to the existence of cultural differences, emphasizing different worldviews and perspectives based on cultural norms.

Preparation for the immersion

Examples of initial immersion activities included involving participants in monthly psycho-educational group meetings the semester prior to departure. Initial group meetings included ice breakers to build trust and group cohesion, such as having each student place a post-it note on their forehead with some stereotypical cultural identity (e.g., Christian, homeless, educated, etc.) and have students interact with them in a way that would illuminate the stereotype. Initial group meetings also focused on discussing fears, areas of anxiety, and other related questions that group members had pertaining to the upcoming immersion experience. During subsequent group meetings, each participant was responsible for presenting information about Costa Rica on specific topic areas (chosen by the group) and facilitating discussion within the group to encourage participation and leadership. Sample presentation topics included gender equality, impact of trauma on refugees, helping professions and health care, the role of family, and indigenous ethnicities of Costa Rica. Group facilitators paid specific attention to group dynamics throughout pre-immersion psycho-educational groups and met frequently to share insights and areas of concern.

Prior to the immersion, partnerships were established with the Costa Rican Humanitarian Foundation (CRHF), a non-profit organization dedicated to solving social and economic issues for vulnerable populations in Costa Rica. The CRHF addresses needs identified by the communities it serves, focusing on education, preventative healthcare, and support for women, at risk youth, and indigenous populations. Establishing the partnership with the CRHF began with the primary group facilitator connecting the foundation liaison via phone and email to ascertain fit of immersion goals and the foundations mission. Next, the primary group facilitator traveled to Costa Rica and met with the foundation liaison several months before the immersion to establish connections and provide input into the immersion agenda, including goals and strategies for learning such as engaging in direct contact and working alongside community members during service projects.

Maurrasse (2003) emphasizes the need to build partnerships between the university and the community, emphasizing the importance of participants working alongside local community members in order to avoid feeling removed from the people impacted by their service and providing ample opportunities for cross-cultural understanding and cross-cultural challenges, both of which are areas rich in potential for individual processing. The partnership with CRHF enabled participants to immerse themselves in the local community and experience direct contact with individuals and organizations. Furthermore, the partnership benefited students by tailoring the experiences to best fit the purpose of enhancing cross cultural counseling. For example, given that the participants were in counselor training programs, a several-day workshop was created for participants to facilitate group activities and dialogue with a group of women that had experienced trauma and abuse. This interaction enabled students to increase their awareness, practice nonverbal counseling skills and learn firsthand of the universal experiences of pain and trauma.

Additional pre-immersion planning included group facilitators assigning participants to their host families and roommates prior to immersion. Roommate assignments were completed based on group facilitator observations of students' levels of anxiety, previous travel experience,

personality characteristics, and familiarity with the language. Before departing, each student was given a course booklet including a detailed calendar for each day outlining what specific activities were, what time students needed to be ready and when group processing sessions would be held. Group facilitators attempted to find a balance between providing structured and free time (see Barden & Cashwell, 2013 for a detailed discussion of these recommendations). Additional resources in the course booklet included contact information, journaling templates, packing lists, detailed itineraries (available upon request), educational films, and other related information.

Experiences during immersion

During the immersion experience, students were exposed to a variety of cultural perspectives to expand their cultural knowledge, awareness, and sensitivity to the Costa Rican culture. American counselor-trainees became aware of how native Costa Ricans, commonly referred to as “Ticos,” display pride in their country, its accomplishments, and remaining distinct from their geographic neighbors, and how they value their liberty. They also noted past virtues that have faltered as a result of foreign influence, modernity, and social change (e.g., drunkenness, drug abuse, theft, burglary, etc.). Most “ticos” remain strongly aligned with traditional values of respect and tolerance. Family and village community remain the cornerstone of society, as bonds are so strong that children often do not leave the home until they marry.

Each student participated in a variety of activities during the CI including homestays, cultural immersion tours, educational presentations, service work, and reflective processing. Each student had a home stay where they and their roommate lived with Costa Rican host families in a small suburban, middle class area during the 3 week immersion. Cultural immersion tours included visits to historic, cultural, and governmental sites where students learned more about current economic and political issues of Costa Rica and Central America. Specific examples of cultural tours included students visiting La Carpio, an impoverished township on the outskirts of San Jose that was primarily settled by Nicaraguan refugees and became the site of a massive landfill. Students visited the State of the Nation, a research and capacity building center focused on the promotion of sustainable human development, and engaged in seminars on the current state of education, literacy, and health in Costa Rica and indigenous villages to learn about medicinal healers. Through collaboration with the CRHF, students interacted with persons in an immigrant community and engaged Nicaraguan refugee survivors in creative activities such as drawing and storytelling related to their previous traumatic experiences and hopes for the future. Students were able to learn firsthand some of the challenges and losses faced by the refugee survivors and understand their current challenges related to child rearing, oppression, and intimate partner violence. Students were asked to facilitate small group activities, giving them first hand group facilitation experience. Additionally, students engaged in service work with the CRHF such as assisting in building bunk beds for local families and clearing rubble to enable the community in La Carpio to build a paved road. In sum, the selected activities were chosen by group facilitators to expose the students to a variety of cultural norms, traditions, challenges, and strengths based on their ethnocentric cultural developmental levels.

Group process

Each day, students participated in large group reflection sessions where they were encouraged to share their experiences for the day and discuss how the experience was impacting or challenging them. Facilitated by group leaders, group reflection sessions prompted students to reflect on their experiences broadly and also through specific salient experiences. Providing a safe, open, and non-judgmental environment was a primary goal of group facilitators. Given that group facilitators had participated in immersion experiences before, they used their own experiences of being challenged and model disclosure to create safety for the group. Group facilitators also participated in homestays and shared about the learning and challenges they were experiencing living within another culture. Facilitators were clear that although not each member had to share every day, processing in the large group was something they were expected to participate in.

Group members seemed to support one another through relating to each other's experiences and also challenge one another when conflict arose. One challenge some group members experienced were feelings of frustration based on the placement of their homestay. Although homestay families were given basic guidelines of how to interact with students, some families were naturally more engaged and welcoming than others. Additionally, some families were more fluent in English than others, allowing some participants to connect on deeper levels compared to participants whose families spoke no English. Through group process and reflection, facilitators acknowledged frustration and used experiences to deepen empathy for international learners in the United States and increase understanding of working with cross cultural populations.

In addition to large group reflections, students were instructed to set aside time daily to individually reflect on their experiences and write in their journal. Through both the group discussions and journaling, students were asked to link course content with their previous experiences and vice versa, evaluate their strengths and needs as a professional counselor, and deepen their understanding of the ethical and clinical implications of working with diverse groups in both national and international counseling populations. In the next sections, we describe the instrumentation that was used to assess differences within and between experimental and comparison groups.

Intercultural Development Inventory

For the current study, the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI; Hammer et al., 2003), a 50-item instrument that assesses a person's dominant stage of intercultural development was used to assess for the impact of the immersion experience on developmental changes in intercultural sensitivity. The IDI is grounded in Bennett's (1986) DMIS theoretical framework and was developed in collaboration with Bennett and Wiseman (Hammer et al., 2003).

The IDI is formatted to provide participants with (a) a perceived orientation (PO) score (self-report of one's own capability in understanding and appropriately adapting to cultural differences), (b) a more objective developmental orientation (DO) score (indicative of a participant's actual orientation toward cultural differences), and (c) an in-depth textual profile of a respondents' predominant level of intercultural competence. The profile provides a detailed interpretation of the stage of intercultural development and transitional issues that accompany that stage (Hammer et al., 2003).

The IDI has undergone rigorous psychometric testing with more than 5,000 respondents during validation. A research team was trained in the DMIS and rated qualitative verbatim-transcribed interviews (N = 25) across the six DMIS orientations. Specific statements (N = 200) from an ethnically diverse sample of respondents were analyzed and clustered to develop a pilot version of the IDI with 239 sample items (Hammer et al., 2003). Based upon feedback from two pilot test respondent pools, the IDI was revised, undergoing a series of validation studies yielding a 50-item instrument. Confirmatory factor analyses, reliability analyses, and construct validity tests were then conducted on 4,763 individuals from 11 distinct, cross-cultural sample groups (Hammer, 2007). The final IDI revision, v.3, (Hammer, 2007) includes a total of five subscales: Denial, Polarization (defense and reversal as a combined orientation), Minimization, Acceptance, and Adaptation along a developmental continuum of intercultural sensitivity. The rigorous psychometric testing of the IDI supports the cross-cultural generalizability, validity, and reliability of an individual's core orientations toward cultural differences (Hammer, 1999, 2007; Hammer et al., 2003).

Procedure

This study implemented a quasi-experimental design with an experimental and comparison group of students in counselor education, with the international cultural immersion course considered the intervention or independent variable. Data collection occurred over a 2-year period, for four groups (i.e., two experimental groups and two comparison groups). Data collection for all groups occurred at similar time points; one semester prior to the departure for the international cultural immersion course and one semester after the students returned home from the immersion. All instruments were administered in paper pencil format on a University campus. Aims of the current research study were to investigate the impact of an international cultural immersion course for counselor trainees that immersed in Costa Rica when compared to their peer counterparts that did not immerse and to assess the extent to which the immersion expanded participants' intercultural sensitivity.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Results from the IDI instrument yielded individual profile reports for each participant regarding their (a) perceived orientation (PO), and (b) developmental orientation (DO) towards cultural difference and commonality. Before the immersion, a comparison of PO for immersed (M = 126.24, SD = 6.89) and non-immersed trainees (M = 123.22, SD = 5.85) revealed no significant difference between the groups $t(37) = 1.48, p = .15$. Likewise, a comparison of DO for immersed (M = 103.95, SD = 15.81) and non-immersed trainees (M = 98.24, SD = 13.43) also revealed no significant difference $t(37) = 1.22, p = .23$, suggesting that groups were similar prior to intervention.

Scores on the IDI prior to the immersion indicated that the majority of participants in the treatment groups favored an ethnocentric developmental orientation (n = 14). Specifically, participants were in the polarization (n = 3), minimization (n = 11), and acceptance stages (n = 5), indicated by group means as follows: Denial, M = 4.68, SD = .29; Defense, M = 4.41, SD =

.51; Reversal, $M = 3.66$, $SD = .63$; Minimization, $M = 3.38$, $SD = .74$; Acceptance, $M = 3.87$, $SD = .67$; Adaptation, $M = 3.38$, $SD = .5$; and Cultural Disengagement, $M = 4.20$, $SD = .70$. Likewise, participants in the comparison groups also favored ethnocentric stages ($n = 17$). Specifically, participants were in the polarization ($n = 2$), minimization ($n = 15$), and acceptance ($n = 3$) stages, indicated by group means as follows: Denial, $M = 4.42$, $SD = .36$; Defense, $M = 4.44$, $SD = .55$; Reversal, $M = 3.63$, $SD = .66$; Minimization, $M = 3.06$, $SD = .63$; Acceptance, $M = 3.51$, $SD = .91$; Adaptation, $M = 3.19$, $SD = .60$; and Cultural Disengagement, $M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.29$.

Because polarization and minimization are ethnocentric stages in the DMIS, the majority of participants (in both comparison and treatment groups) ($n = 26$, 78.8%), seemed to make sense of cultural differences and commonalities based on their own cultural values, use broad stereotypes to identify cultural differences, and support less complex experiences of cultural difference and commonality (Hammer, 2007). There were seven participants (in both treatment and comparison groups) who were found to be in the acceptance stage, which falls within the ethnorelative developmental orientation. Participants in this stage are believed to make sense of cultural differences and commonalities based on one's own and other culture's values and practices, use cultural generalizations to recognize cultural differences, and support more complex experiences of cultural differences and commonality (Hammer, 2007).

At time two (i.e., post-immersion), participants in experimental ($n = 2$) and comparison ($n = 4$) groups experienced attrition or incomplete data for post-assessments. Results indicated that participants in the treatment groups were in the minimization ($n = 12$), and acceptance stages ($n = 5$). Participants in the comparison groups were found to be in the polarization ($n = 2$), minimization ($n = 11$), and acceptance ($n = 3$) stages. Therefore, developmental shifts in orientation remained largely unaffected for both experimental and comparison groups. Interestingly, participants in the experimental group who were previously in the polarization orientation seemed to shift into the minimization orientation, indicating developmental progression of cultural sensitivity. In addition, there were more changes in the students from the summer 2011 immersion as seven trainees advanced one developmental stage between the test administrations, whereas none of the students from the summer 2012 immersion advanced their developmental stage.

Main Analyses

To examine differences between participants in the treatment and comparison groups, repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted. Participation in the international cultural immersion experience (i.e., immersion or no immersion) served as the discrete within-subjects independent variable for both the treatment and comparison groups. Participants' observed DO and self-reported PO in intercultural sensitivity served as the continuous within-subjects dependent variables. Results indicated that participants who participated in the immersion experience did not have significantly different mean scores on DO than those who did not participate in immersion, $F(1, 31) = 2.07$, $p = .16$. Similarly, participants who were immersed did not have statistically significant different mean scores on self-reported PO than those who were not immersed, $F(1, 31) = 1.98$, $p = .17$. Examination of the simple effects indicated treatment group

participants reported higher perceived intercultural sensitivity scores at post-assessment than comparison participants. The group means are shown in Table 1 and ANOVA results in Table 2.

	DO		PO	
CI History	Pre-treatment	Post-treatment	Pre-treatment	Post-treatment
Immersed	102.15	107.85	125.43	127.80
	(15.32)	(13.16)	(6.67)	(4.97)
Not Immersed	100.79	100.55	124.07	124.11
	(13.06)	(13.68)	(5.93)	(5.48)

Table 1: Group means of Intercultural Sensitivity by Time and Cultural Immersion

	Initial Developmental Stage		
Change in DO	Polarization	Minimization	Acceptance
Immersed	16.13	7.48	-6.61
	(14.77)	(12.50)	(10.16)
Not Immersed	6.00	.32	-4.59
	-	(9.96)	(5.23)
	Initial Developmental Stage		
Change in PO	Polarization	Minimization	Acceptance
Immersed	6.31	3.46	-3.35
	(6.01)	(4.69)	(3.42)
Not Immersed	1.46	.48	-2.17
	-	(3.90)	(2.61)

Table 2: Change in Group means of Intercultural Sensitivity by Time, Cultural Immersion, and Initial Development Stage

A two-way ANOVA with repeated measures factor was conducted to examine the influence of a participant's initial developmental stage and participation in immersion on changes in intercultural sensitivity. Participation in the international cultural immersion experience (i.e., immersion or no immersion) served as the first discrete within-subjects independent variable while the participants' initially favored developmental stage (from the pre-immersion IDI administration) served as the second independent variable. Participants' observed developmental orientation (DO), and perceived orientation (PO) in intercultural sensitivity served as the continuous within-subjects dependent variables. For observed DO, neither immersion experience, $F(1, 27) = .91$, $p = .25$, nor initial developmental stage manifested a significant main effect, $F(2, 27) = 2.92$, $p = .07$, and no significant interaction was observed, $F(1, 27) = .52$, $p = .60$. For self-perceived PO, the immersion experience did not manifest a significant main effect, $F(1, 27) = 1.17$, $p = .29$, though initial developmental stage did, $F(2, 27) = 3.94$, $p = .03$. As with DO, no significant interaction was observed for PO, $F(2, 27) = .78$, $p = .47$. Examination of the simple effects indicated intervention group participants exhibited a greater change in both DO and PO intercultural sensitivity scores at post-assessment than comparison participants for all developmental stages. Additionally, participants tended to have an inverse relationship between initial developmental stage and intercultural sensitivity score growth for both intervention and comparison groups. Changes in group means are shown in Table 2 and ANOVA results in Table 3.

	Df	F	η^2	Power
DO				
Immersion	1	.91	.03	.15
Initial Developmental Stage	2	2.92	.18	.52
Interaction	2	.52	.04	.13
PO				
Immersion	1	1.17	.04	.16
Initial Developmental Stage	2	3.94	.23	.69
Interaction	2	.78	.06	.17

Table 3: 2x2 Repeated Measures ANOVAs for Both DO and PO Between Counselor-Trainees Who Were and Were Not Immersed and Were at Different Developmental Stages

Limitations

The results of the current study may provide insight into the impact of an international cultural immersion group intervention on developing intercultural sensitivity for counselor trainees. Nevertheless, the results need to be interpreted within the context of study limitations. Sample size, social desirability, and differences between the two immersion experiences may be limitations impacting the generalizability of the results. The sample in the current investigation consisted of relatively small groups and was limited in diversity as participants' predominately identified as Euro-American females sampled from one university. Although the sample was relatively homogenous, demographic data for participants in the sample were relatively representative to the population of counselor trainees. In addition there may have been a selection bias as participants chose to enroll in the international cultural immersion course as well as voluntary participation in comparison groups. Social desirability may also confound the results, as participants were volunteers responding to questions regarding their intercultural sensitivity, although the IDI instrument accounts for this by measuring both perceived and observed levels of intercultural sensitivity.

Furthermore, due to distinctions between the two groups of immersed trainees (i.e., the first group had seven members advance one developmental stage); there may have been differences between the first and second international immersion experiences. Examples of potential differences include the inclusion of four doctoral students in the first cohort, whereas the second cohort contained master's students alone. In addition, two teaching assistants worked with the instructor in the first cohort, assisting with the group process. Finally, although both groups completed journaling throughout immersion, a structured immersion journal template was utilized in the first year but not in the second year due to student feedback suggesting removing structured reflection. In sum, although the current investigation has limitations, we believe the findings from this study have several implications for group workers, and counselor educators.

Discussion

Researchers (e.g., Alexander et al., 2005; Barden & Cashwell, 2014; Burnett et al., 2004; Canfield, Low, & Hovestadt, 2009; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2010) have reported positive benefits of immersion experiences in developing helping professionals. However, results have been primarily qualitative and/or relied on anecdotal evidence such as participants' journals. This study provided the first known empirical exploration utilizing a quasi-experimental research

design in conjunction with the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) with counselor trainees. Given that the IDI has been established as reliable, cross-culturally generalizable, and valid assessment of individuals and groups core orientations toward cultural differences, counselor educators may want to consider the utility of this instrument when assessing for cultural sensitivity over some of the more commonly used instruments in multicultural counseling research (Constantine et al., 2002; Hammer, 2007).

Results from the current study suggest that in comparison, participants in the current sample had lower scores for intercultural sensitivity than participants in previous studies (Altshuler, Sussman, & Kachur, 2003; Anderson et al., 2006). For example, Altshuler and colleagues (2003) reported that group mean IDI ratings for medical student study participants ($N = 24$) before a behavioral intervention were predominantly in the ethnorelative orientation of acceptance compared to participants in the current study who were largely represented in the ethnocentric orientations of defense and minimization. One explanation for differences in group means may be attributed to counselor trainees being less hindered by the tendency of social desirability than other helping professionals. Constantine and Ladany (2000) note that social desirability is a pattern of responding that reflects some individual's need to provide socially acceptable responses to questions rather than report their actual attitudes and feelings in order to present a favorable image.

Although we had expected to find more significant differences between experimental and comparison groups and/or between pre- and post-administrations of the IDI, the lack of significant changes in all four groups is interesting. Contrary to Andersen and colleagues (2006) and Paige et al. (2004) who report significant changes in overall developmental score, we did not find any significant changes on subscales or total scores. On the other hand, results from this study support findings from Andersen et al. (2006) on the lack of significance on specific subscales after a short term study abroad. Interestingly, we did see positive gains in group means for subscales that were categorized by ethnocentrism (i.e., defense and minimization). According to Bennett's DMIS, people develop sensitivity on each of the stages simultaneously, meaning they do not need to resolve the issues in one stage before moving on to the next stage (Bennett, 1993). Although the majority of changes were not significant to move students from one stage to the next, positive increases in mean scores suggest that students did increase cultural sensitivity within stages rather than between stages. It also noteworthy that the only students ($n = 7$) who increased intercultural sensitivity between stages were from the experimental condition.

Though main data analyses did not manifest significant findings, there are observable trends that are consistent with the general theme found in the literature on the effectiveness of cultural immersion on student development. When students are grouped by their initial favored DMIS orientation, those in the experimental groups displayed larger increases in their PO and DO scores. This trend is quite noticeable among students initially in the minimization stage (which also happens to account for the majority of students in the study). Also, the positive trend of immersion is greater on the measure of DO, rather than on that of PO. While perceived intercultural sensitivity and related measures of self-efficacy are important constructs for counselors, work with clients is more directly impacted by one's outward manifestation of intercultural sensitivity, or one's DO. Any training strategy that potentially can impact this

external factor is of interest in the development of more culturally competent and effective counselors.

Implications for Counselor Educators and Group Workers

Bemak and Chung (2004) highlight the lack of systematic efforts in addressing the need for culturally sensitive group counselors to work across cultural boundaries, asserting that training and practice continues to be grounded in western-European models. The authors offer several steps for counselor educators to more effectively train graduate students to be prepared for facilitating multicultural group work, highlight the need to integrate current multicultural best practices and establish new standards for training using the multicultural and social justice competence principles for group workers. Therefore, building upon the support for integrating experiential education into multicultural group work seems clear. Specifically, encouraging group level cultural immersion experiences where students are exposed to being “other” seems appropriate in bridging the principles and competencies of group workers and actual pedagogical training practices. Given that the Multicultural and Social Justice Competence Principles for Group Workers calls for group facilitators to be aware of socio-political influence, differences in worldviews and cultures, and one’s own values, biases, and limitations, it seems clear that training methods must focus on providing experiences for counselor trainees to be exposed and experience cultural differences (Singh et al., 2012). In a 2013 study, Barden and Cashwell identified critical factors to immersion experiences. Interestingly, the most commonly reported negative critical incident was related to group dynamics, with participants reporting feeling excluded from group, power dynamics with group facilitators and unsafe environments to openly process their experiences. Findings from this study support previous research regarding the need to attend to safety issues when facilitating multicultural experiential learning (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002). Although the current investigation did not specifically assess for safety within the group processing sessions, the facilitators followed recommendations from scholars (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Barden & Cashwell, 2014; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) regarding integrating common group building strategies. Examples from the current investigation include using ice breakers to establish group cohesion, providing space prior to immersion and during immersion to discuss both positive and negative experiences, establishing group rules prior to immersion, and offering individual process sessions when needed, while immersed. Counselor educators are encouraged to keep group dynamics at the forefront when planning, implementing, and debriefing from cultural immersion experiences.

Another implication from the current study is the need for counselor educators to consider trainees’ developmental levels of intercultural sensitivity when establishing interventions. For example, if trainees are primarily in ethnorelative orientations of cultural sensitivity, then it seems clear that decreased focus on exposure to different cultural norms and increased focus on integrating cultural differences into personal worldviews would be warranted. Although results did not indicate significant developmental changes for experimental group participants in the current study, more research is needed to understand why. For example, Tomlinson-Clarke and Clarke (2010) along with Ishii and colleagues (2009) contended that CI must be of sufficient duration for students to be confronted by and have to respond to the potential culture shock arising from being in another culture. Furthermore, group process and safety have been argued to be the conduit for trainees to work through cultural shock, resistance, and feelings that emerge as

a result of being “other” (Barden & Cashwell, 2013; Chung & Bemak, 2002; West-Olatunji et al., 2011). Results from the current study suggest that the length of immersion along with opportunities to process CI experiences may have been factors given that scores in cultural sensitivity all increased but developmental levels did not change significantly. In summary, although results from this study have important implications for preparing future group workers in responding to diverse groups, several areas of future research remain.

Recommendations for Future Research

As with all research, this study brought up more questions than it answered. Specifically, results from this study highlight the need to consider developmental levels of cultural sensitivity when developing interventions. Research that aims to assess developmental levels of intercultural sensitivity and adapts interventions such as immersion experiences based on developmental levels would substantially contribute to this body of research. Are certain interventions more effective for persons in ethnocentric orientations compared to persons in ethnorelative orientations? If students from mixed developmental orientations are all participating in the same immersion experience, are there ways to tailor process groups or journaling prompts to best facilitate developmental progression on a continuum of cultural sensitivity?

Future research on cultural immersion should continue the use of rigorous methodological designs. Examples may include quasi experimental designs and utilization of experimental and comparison groups to increase confidence that observed changes are a result of the immersion and no other external factors; qualitative designs to increase depth of understanding of how immersion experiences influence counselor trainees’ development; or mixed method designs to complement and integrate findings from qualitative and quantitative data. Additionally, further research on the critical factors that increase or impede changes in cultural sensitivity is warranted. For example, research controlling for factors such as length of the immersion to better understand the minimum amount of time that students need to be immersed for significant change are encouraged. Additional factors that may increase or impede changes are related to group dynamics. Building upon the work of Barden and Cashwell (2013), research specifically investigating the influence of safety in group while immersed is warranted. Furthermore, given the call for counselor trainees to be culturally sensitive when facilitating groups, more research is needed on the translation between cultural immersion experiences and influence on group facilitation skills. In sum, while the body of literature on international cultural immersion is growing, ample opportunity remains for scholars to contribute and expand existing knowledge of the efficacy of immersion experiences.

Conclusion

In sum, results from the current study highlight the need to continue expanding and evaluating assessments and developmental levels of intercultural sensitivity for counselor trainees. Results from this study provide the first empirical quasi-experimental research design using the IDI instrument and DMIS theoretical framework to evaluate the efficacy of international cultural immersion experiences for counselor trainees. While the body of literature of cultural immersion as an effective pedagogical tool in increasing cultural sensitivity is promising (e.g., Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Barden & Cashwell, 2014; DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Kim & Lyons, 2003;

Paige et al., 2009), several areas of future research remain. As the endeavor to develop counselor trainees that are knowledgeable and skilled to work with groups from diverse backgrounds continues, counselor education programs have a responsibility to implement effective pedagogical approaches that enhance the development of cultural sensitivity.

Notes

Note: Standard deviations appear in parentheses below group means.

Note: Positive changes in means indicate growth in Intercultural Sensitivity. Standard deviations appear below group means in parentheses and italics.

Note: Power computed at $\alpha = .05$. Immersed $n = 17$, Not immersed $n = 16$

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